

### St. Mark: Witness to a Bold Life Lived in God

It is not easy being young. Right now in our nation we have an unemployment rate of between 9%-10% which is very high and we as a nation are vocalizing this as the single most important issue of today.<sup>1</sup> Did you realize, however, that for young people--those under age twenty-four--the unemployment rate is a staggering 18.9%! It is not easy these days for young people: there is a tremendous amount of pressure to spend money for secondary education in fields that are highly competitive and constantly changing. Employers are seeking people who are not only young and energetic but they want employees who are very well trained and who are committed workers.

I remember when I was in my early twenties and the struggles I went through in the work place. Shortly after college I went to work as a Financial Consultant ("stock-broker") for Merrill Lynch & Company. Those days, like today the expectations for Consultants was not to take people's "play" money to try and make big dollars in the stock market but rather the expectation was to bring under management people's entire retirement savings or their retirements savings and their life savings.

This was difficult for a twenty something young man who looked very young too. It is not that I was uneducated and it wasn't that I didn't have good sound investment advice. The problem for most people was the simple fact that they were not about to hand over their life's savings to someone as young as I was. At times you could imagine my frustration. At times I was even angry and bitter about how the real world worked. Now, many years later and in a better place to objectively reflect on that life experience I realize that so many people who turned me down were in fact right. Yes, in some ways I was too young. People in their twenties even if they have a lot of knowledge approach life differently--they are still learning. Life isn't always about just having the right answer but it is about having the right experience too.

Today we focus on a young man who made his fair share of mistakes, but who took those mistakes, learned from them and went on to do tremendous things that were truly appreciated by those around him. Today we celebrate Saint Mark the Evangelist. Mark would become an important companion and ally not to one but to two great towering apostles: Paul and Peter.

What you probably are most familiar with and most readily associate Mark's name with is the second Gospel, the Gospel that bears his name. What you may not be as familiar with is that Mark's given name is actually John (see

Acts 12:12,25;15:37), and that he was much younger than the men Jesus called to be His apostles.

Mark appears on the scene somewhat abruptly in the book of Acts at a critical time for the early church. In Acts 12 we hear of Herod fiercely persecuting the church at Jerusalem. Acts 12 records for us the martyrdom of James the brother of John and one of the three chief apostles. Because of James' death the people encouraged Herod to continue his fierce attacks against the church which he was happy to do.

One event that occurred shortly after James' death was Peter's imprisonment. Luke, the author of the book of Acts, tells us that Herod had Peter in two chains and personally guarded by multiple guards--this was a serious persecution of the church which needed the direct intervention by God. God did in fact intervene and He had Peter freed from prison by the actions of an angel. Where did Peter go right from prison? Peter went directly to the home of Mark. Luke records this for us this way:

**[Peter] went to the house of Mary the mother of John, also called Mark, where many people had gathered and were praying. Peter knocked at the outer entrance, and a servant girl named Rhoda came to answer the door. When she recognized Peter's voice, she was so overjoyed she ran back without opening it and exclaimed, "Peter is at the door!"** (Acts 12:12-14).

This small section is telling. First, we are told that Peter went to Mary's house. What is conspicuously absent is any reference to Mary's husband. Did this mean she didn't have one? Was she a widow? The second important fact is that Mary is referred to as "the mother of John, also called Mark." This shows us that Mark himself was an important person and not only a young man. Another thing easy to miss is that a servant girl answered the door. Did this mean the family was wealthy? We are told also that Mary's house was a gathering place for many people--how big was this home? Was Mark a privileged youth?

Shortly after all this it is recorded that St. Paul and Barnabas would leave Jerusalem to go on to what we refer to as their First Missionary Journey. Paul and Barnabas worked a lot together as a team. Later on in his letters Paul would refer to Mark as Barnabas' cousin.

On this First Missionary Journey as Barnabas and Paul would go north of Jerusalem, then onto the Island of Cyprus and eventually onto what is today Southern Turkey, proclaiming the Gospel. It was here at a place called Perga in Pamphylia that Mark would make a decision that would come to haunt him and a decision that would separate Paul and Barnabas from working together. Mark made the decision to leave Paul and Barnabas and to go home.

Paul would later reference this leaving by Mark as an abandonment. Why did he do it? We can only speculate. Maybe this young man, possibly well to do simply became homesick. We are told that Mark went back to Jerusalem and that is where his home was located. To be sure this missionary work was not easy and it was fraught with persecution and difficulty. Maybe the word was simply too hard and too much for Mark. Was Mark uncertain of the message of

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.thehilltoponline.com/teens-young-adults-account-for-large-number-of-unemployed-1.2219495>

the Gospel and for this reason left Paul and Barnabas? This is highly unlikely in light of everything we know of Mark, especially of what Mark would go on to do.

We do know, however, that some time later when Paul wanted to go on a Second Missionary Journey to first revisit those places he and Barnabas went previously, Paul adamantly refused to take Mark with him because he had previously abandoned him and Barnabas. Here Barnabas was supportive of Mark and wanted him to come along. Here is where these two great missionaries could not come to resolution and each went their own way.

**Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us go back and visit the brothers in all the towns where we preached the word of the Lord and see how they are doing." Barnabas wanted to take John, also called Mark, with them, but Paul did not think it wise to take him, because he had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not continued with them in the work. They had such a sharp disagreement that they parted company. Barnabas took Mark and sailed for Cyprus, but Paul chose Silas and left, commended by the brothers to the grace of the Lord. He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches.** (Acts 15:36-41).

Imagine the affect this had on Mark. This simple response from Paul could have been the one lasting impression that would forever cloud Mark every day of his life as he would view himself as undependable and a quitter, some useless to the apostles. Or there was a second reaction. Mark could realize his poor decision, realize his fault and to move on and become a better person. By God's grace this is exactly what Mark did. And he did this powerfully so.

This is a great reminder to all of us who are the church. Who was right? Was Paul right for demanding accountability and for showing that poor decisions have consequences? Or was Barnabas right for having an open hand and seeking reconciliation and forgiveness? The answer is both were right in their own ways.

Today we are reminded that being called to do the Lord's work is serious and when we do not do it or when we do it uncommitted there is a consequence to be paid. Yet we cannot take this too far either. Church is a place of the Gospel. Church is a place where the forgiveness of sins and renewal of life must be most clearly preached and practiced because each member of the church has been reconciled through the free and powerful love Jesus Christ the head of the church.

Today everyone has a role to play--young and old. People make mistakes. People need to be forgiven. People need a chance to grow and to mature and to be picked up and supported when they fail trying to do great things.

What indications do we have that Mark did learn from his mistakes and went on to greatness? Several things. First, we have the simple universal recognition going back to the ancient church that Mark is in fact the author of the

second Gospel, the one that bears his name. Many, though not all, scholars believe Mark's Gospel was the first one penned.

In the Gospel of Mark we encounter something very interesting. It was common in the ancient world for an author not to have his name show up prominently in their work. We see this in the Gospels. For example the Apostle John, though important and one of the inner three apostles (along with Peter and James) doesn't have his name show up in the Gospel. This would be very strange except for the fact that John wrote the Gospel. Do we have the same thing at work in the Gospel of Mark? Very likely yes.

Within one of the most important sections and scenes of the entire Gospel of Mark: Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane the night He was betrayed, we have this incident: **"A young man, wearing nothing but a linen garment, was following Jesus. When they seized him, he fled naked, leaving his garment behind.** (Mark 14:51-52).

This wouldn't make much sense especially at so critical a point in the life of Jesus were this not the author of the Gospel telling us something important. It would make sense for Mark to place this incident here as a kind of repentance for the fragility of his youth--the worst act was abandoning Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane because of fear. This is also an important reminder that Mark was an eyewitness of the events of Jesus' life and hence his credibility as a Gospel author.

Perhaps no greater account to what Mark was able to make of the remainder of his life after his failure as a youth exists than the records of not one but two great apostles: Paul and Peter.

As Paul went on to suffer for the Gospel proclamation he would be with Mark his friend. Twice Paul would refer to Mark's companionship during difficult times--once in the book of Colossians and another time in the book of Philemon. Also at the end of his life and in what is most likely the last letter Paul wrote that we have in our New Testament, Paul says this about Mark. **"Get Mark and bring him with you, because he is helpful to me in my ministry."** (2 Timothy 4:11).

It must be noted however that Mark is not best remembered as a companion of Paul but rather as a companion of Peter. As a matter of fact it is Mark's companionship with Peter that lent credence to Mark's Gospel witness. Peter writes this about this young man who worked hard for the Gospel: **"She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends you her greetings, and so does my son Mark."** (1 Peter 5:13).

What lessons does Mark's life teach us today? First it teaches us that everyone--young and old--has a role to play in the life of the church. Second when we are called to great things mistakes will be made. The church is always a place of accountability but it is also a place of healing. What greater witness of the healing and reconciliation of Jesus' death on the cross for the whole world is there than when the church forgives, restores and encourages her own. Amen.